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February 4, 2003

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Leaderless Foster Care System Will Continue to Fail Children

California has not made adequate progress in reforming its foster care system, and will not make progress until the State designates a leader for foster care reform, the Little Hoover Commission told policy-makers on Tuesday.

In 1999 the Commission issued a report on California's foster care system. The report, *Now in Our Hands: Caring for California's Abused and Neglected Children*, outlined a comprehensive strategy for reform.

"Three years have passed since the release of that report," wrote Commission Chairman Michael Alpert in a letter to policy-makers. "In that time there has been considerable action, but almost no real progress. The greatest obstacle to meaningful reform is an unwillingness on the part of both state and local leaders to take responsibility for reforming the foster care system."

The Commission found that since 1999 the State has spent millions of dollars on research, task forces and reform efforts that have not materially improved outcomes. Specifically, the Commission found the reforms have failed to address the following fundamental concerns:

- Foster care is not temporary. Half of the children in foster care remain in care for 6 to 36 months. One in four are in foster care for 42 months or longer.
- Foster care is not stable. For those placed with non-relatives in 2000, of the 8,664 in care for a year or more, just 25 percent had a stable placement, 43 percent were moved three or more times, 11 percent five or more times.
- Siblings are separated. Just 40 percent of sibling groups are placed with all siblings together; 65 percent are placed with at least some siblings.

In addition, public officials and child advocates told the Commission that children in foster care continue to receive inadequate health care and educational services. Just 65 percent receive medical assessments within 60 days. Only half receive any form of dental care or necessary mental health services. Regulations require medical and dental care be provided within 30 days of entering care.

In 2000 the Department of Social Services dedicated \$3 million and three years to the Child Welfare Services Stakeholders Group to recommend strategies to redesign the child welfare system, including foster care. The group is examining many of the issues the Commission identified as problematic in 1999. But the effort is not addressing who is responsible for reforms, creating a management system to improve outcomes, or promoting accountability through oversight.

In testimony before the Commission, Health and Human Services Agency Secretary Grantland Johnson conceded, “the system is broken and needs fixing.” But he asserted that the State should not direct counties in how to reform services.

“The current muddle of authority and responsibility frustrates the innovative and shields the unresponsive,” wrote Chairman Alpert. “The buck stops nowhere. And until that problem is resolved discussions about ‘best practices’ and ‘outcome measures’ are meaningless.”

The Commission urged the Governor and Legislature to designate a leader for foster care who would be accountable for reforms. The Commission recommended the creation of a Child Welfare Inspector General and a State Child Welfare Oversight Board. Similar recommendations were directed to county supervisors.

The Commission concluded that existing oversight efforts are inadequate. Federal law requires the State to establish three citizen review panels to oversee efforts to protect children. But existing efforts fail to provide the required oversight.

In 2001, 132,042 children spent time in foster care, the last year for which these data were available. The State tracks caseloads on a point-in-time basis. The 2002 caseload was 91,509, down from 105,538 on the same day in 1999. The reduction is largely attributed to increased efforts to move children into guardianships with relatives.

In fiscal year 2002-03, \$2.2 billion was allocated for foster care. Since 1999 the Legislature and Governor have considered more than 100 reform proposals. Despite these efforts, California recently failed a federal performance review and faces penalties of up to \$18.2 million if it does not adequately address deficiencies.

“Until foster care is a temporary, short-term and safe place for children, it is incumbent upon all community leaders to focus political capital on this issue,” concluded Alpert. “When the State intervenes to protect the lives of children it takes on a tremendous obligation. It is time for us to live up to that obligation.”

The Little Hoover Commission is a bipartisan and independent state agency charged with recommending ways to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of state programs. The Commission’s recommendations are sent to the Governor and the Legislature. To obtain a copy of the report, *Still In Our Hands: A Review of Efforts to Reform Foster Care In California*, contact the Commission or visit its Web site: www.lhc.ca.gov.